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Apocalypse Meow*

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Is there a more famous encounter between a naked philosopher and an animal than Derrida disrobed in his bathroom one morning facing his cat? It must at least be the most richly recounted. The full frontal exposure prompts the embarrassed Frenchman to write a passage of great relevance to this paper, wherein he describes the effect of his pet feline's stare, what amounts to the end of the human, to the apocalypse:

> The gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man . . . And in these moments of nakedness, under the gaze of the animal, everything can happen to me, I am like a child ready for the apocalypse, I am (following) the apocalypse itself, that is to say the ultimate and first event of the end, the unveiling and the verdict. I am (following) it, the apocalypse (2008, 12).

But the apocalyptic spell Derrida's cat casts is fleeting: "when the instant of extreme passion passes, and I find peace again, then I can relax and speak of the beasts of the Apocalypse, visit them in the museum, see them in a painting . . . I can visit them at the zoo" (12). Apocalypse evaded.

Following Derrida in his moment of extreme passion, I am here suggesting that the radical Left's target of concern could be "the human" itself: a social and political order grounded in a human/animal binary and implicated in mass species death, violence, suffering and exploitation, collectively if inadequately known as environmental crises. Rather than responding to these crises with a depoliticizing apocalyptic narrative, which conjures a falsely common, humanity-wide fate or responsibility that belies the heterogeneity *within* the human, the human subject at the center of this narrative should be interrogated. How is "the human" produced, maintained, and with what effects?

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In short, the human at once relies upon and denies the ultimate dispossessed and abject "other": "the animal."[1] Its exclusions are material as well as symbolic; they are political-ethical-economic; and they enable multi-species dispossession on a grand and systemic scale. The human is a master accumulation strategy. I wonder if apocalypse might be recuperated as an opportunity for denaturalizing the human, fixating on its "abyssal limits" and allowing possibly even the apocalypse of the human, what I here (with generous narrative license!) call apocalypse meow. It must be confessed at the outset that this paper operates on a rather polemical register. I gratefully follow Wainwright (2010, 984), who joins Derrida in declaring that polemic is necessary "wherever there is thinking about the boundaries and character of a field of knowledge, or discipline." The human is undoubtedly one such boundary. Onward!

. . . To my first TV celebrity encounter. It was not with Rosie O'Donnell or Bob Barker or any other kind of TV star who probably comes to mind. It was with a gecko. S/he was the lead actor in a commercial for Telus—a Canadian telecommunications company. I also met the toad star of a Mitsubishi commercial. In both cases I played it cool, although I cannot take too much credit for my reaction, because the animals did not exactly have the intimidating, lavish lifestyles of the rich and famous. When not on the film set, they live in small glass tanks furnished with thick green vegetation. Gary Oliver, their caretaker, mists them regularly with water.

Oliver keeps over a hundred exotic animals in a warehouse just south of Vancouver, Canada. Dual animal rental agency and animal sanctuary, Oliver's business, Cinemazoo, takes in unwanted exotic pets and provides them with food and shelter, renting some animals for films, television, and for presentations at schools, birthday parties, and corporate events. Oliver sees himself as "a shepherd of different types of animals." Convinced that "seeing animals in real life" is an essential part of learning to care and respect for them, Oliver has dedicated his life to exhibiting exotic animals that he refers to as "ambassadors for their species." Oliver's mission echoes modern zoos' mantra. Over the past few decades, zoos worldwide have remade themselves along conservation lines, advertising a two-fold conservation mandate: species breeding and "real life" encounters with animals. This mandate obtains traction through two legitimating conditions, the first more debatable than the second: 1) people are increasingly estranged from animals in their daily life; and 2) some species populations are so diminished that the only place humans can guarantee their continued existence at all is in a cage.

This is a seriously sad state of affairs. Some might even say apocalyptic. For many species it might be said that the apocalypse is here or even has come and gone. Forgive the following classic, anthropomorphizing move and imagine a state of the

[1] Scare quotes are hereafter absent but their connotation—that the terms' meanings are not pre-given—is meant to persist.

world wherein there were so few humans left that to ensure our own species' reproductive future, the few of us left were kept in quarantined glass enclosures and once a year or so permitted a conjugal visit for breeding purposes—no pressure or anything, just the future of the human race. With others watching. Terrifying, right?

It is an easy point to make, that apocalypse is defined in almost totally human terms. Although environmental apocalypticism is tied to statistics about species loss and habitat destruction, it is only really an apocalypse once human beings (and capitalist production for that matter) are under threat. Occasionally nonhuman species deemed extraordinary in some manner (usually in the degree to which either they are most "like us" or useful to us) may enter into the apocalyptic calculus—dolphins that can recognize themselves in the mirror, chimpanzees that use tools. This is further evidence of apocalypticism's anthropocentrism.

Leftist critiques of apocalyptic narratives, while not necessarily incompatible with the previous point, have focused instead on these narratives' depoliticizing tendencies. Swyngedouw (2010a; 2011) locates apocalypse within a general trend toward environmental populism and "post-politics," a political formation that forecloses the political, preventing the politicization of particulars (Swyngedouw 2010b). He argues that populism never assigns proper names to things, signifying (following Rancière) an erosion of politics and "genuine democracy . . . [which] is a space where the unnamed, the uncounted, and, consequently, un-symbolized become named and counted" (Swyngedouw 2011, 80). Whereas class struggle was about naming the proletariat, and feminist struggles were named through "woman" as a political category, a defining feature of post-politics is an ambiguous and unnamed enemy or target of concern. As Swyngedouw (2010b; 2011) contends, the post-political condition invokes a common predicament and the need for common humanity-wide action, with "human" and "humanity" vacant signifiers and homogenizing subjects in this politics. I return to this idea soon.

Over a decade earlier, Katz (1995) also argues that "apocalypticism is politically disabling" (277). She writes: "contemporary problems are so serious that rendering them apocalyptic obscures their political ecology—their sources, their political, economic and social dimensions" (278). Loathe to implicate "human nature" as one of these sources, Katz instead targets global capitalism, which is "premised on a series of socially-constructed differences that, in apocalyptic visions, take a universal character: man/woman; culture/nature; first world/third world; bourgeoisie/working class" (279). Towards the end of her short chapter, she remarks that "human beings are simultaneously different from and of a piece with bees" (280), calling subsequently for "a usable environmental politics [that] takes seriously the political responsibility implied by the difference between people and bees" (280). There is so much to agree with here. But Katz misses a big binary in her list: human/animal. On the other hand, she clearly if implicitly recognizes not only the productiveness of this binary and its role in environmental politics (the humans and the bees), but also the attention it deserves. The question then remains: Although according to Katz,

apocalyptic politics underplays if not entirely ignores the production process, is this inherent to apocalypticism, or is there potential to train apocalypticism onto production, particularly of the human and the human/animal binary?

Neither a natural order, nor a pre-given subject position, nor a category that exists beyond politics, the human is rather an intensely political category whose ongoing production is rife with violence, contestation, and hierarchy. The central mode of this production is the human/animal binary that Haraway (2008, 18) says "flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism." This binary is continually re-made and re-authorized politically, legally, scientifically, religiously, and so on. It is the product of particular epistemologies, ontologies, and power relations, and it also produces these same structures.

The spatial, material and discursive inclusion and exclusion of animals construct the human/animal binary. Materially, animals are included in the "human" project as laborers, food, clothing, and so on, but are excluded from life itself should their dead bodies be of economic value. Animals work for us, for free, and are largely "disposable workers" in a manner similar to and different from the "disposable women" Wright (2006) observes are fundamental to the workings of capital and labor in Mexican *maquiladoras*. The similarity lies in how both animal laborers and these women factory workers are devalued as laborers, and this devaluing of their labor actually contributes to the formation of value in the commodities and capital of the production network. They are different in that of course the women are still paid—albeit marginally—and their labor is recognized as labor.

Animals do not just labor for free. They also die for profit and power. The most obvious example of industrial meat production aside, capitalism and the liberal state derive significant profits from the ability to kill—often in mass numbers—wild animals. Killing wolves, bears, cougars, and other animals has been a predominant colonial project, with bounty often the first laws passed in the colonies. Not only domesticated but also wild animals have played and continue to play a central role, materially and symbolically, in capitalism and the formation of the nation state, as symbols, commodities, and spectacle. Discursively animals found the human subject by virtue of their exclusion: the human is what is not animal. This is a juridico-political, ethical exclusion that is always at the same time an inclusion.

The human thus appears to be a neurological or biophysiological product rather than a result of specific histories, geographies, and social relations, between humans and also humans and animals.

Certainly particular socio-natural properties do become essential to a thing's power and geopolitical centrality (think opposable thumbs, cerebral cortexes, bipedalism, and so on). But as Huber (2011, 34, emphasis added) argues in the context of oil, "biophysical capacities are *only realizable through particular uneven social relations of culture, history, and power.*" Specific conditions and relations

produce the human, which is entirely different than saying that humans are the same as each other or as other animals. Their differences should not be disregarded for a host of reasons, not the least of which is the political struggle various groups have made to claim both difference and *not* being animals. It is not my aim to ignore, then, the particularities of the human species, although I would emphasize that these particularities are not universal and are increasingly being shown to be far less particular than we imagined.

While what counts as human shifts dramatically in time and space, what remains for the most part constant is the animal outside that founds this category. These are not meaningless exclusions, and in the context of environmental politics, of course, they have especially pronounced momentum and significance. The naturalization of a superior, distinct species category enables systematically and casually inflicted death and suffering on an inconceivable scale. What is outside the "human" is far more "killable," like Haraway says, more easily "noncriminally put to death," says Derrida, more "precarious" for Butler. Although Butler's extensive work on the politics of the human has been criticized for anthropocentrism, in a recent interview (Antonello and Farneti 2009), she questions what it might mean to share conditions of vulnerability and precariousness with animals and the environment, and suggests it undoes "the very conceit of anthropocentrism." Such an undoing is precisely what I advocate. While an entrenched and powerful category, the human is also changeable and fluid. As Derrida (2008, 5) says, "the list of what is 'proper' to man always forms a configuration, from the first moment. For that very reason, it can never be limited to a single trait and is never closed." The human's contingencies, dependencies and destructive, homogenizing effects should be front and center in environmental politics. To show its strangeness is to show that it could be otherwise. Ultimately, we might have to reconfigure subjectivity's contours and topographies, allow for an apocalypse of the human subject. We might have to get naked in front of our pets.

"A true political space," writes Swyngedouw (2010b, 194), "is always a space of contestation for those who are not-all, who are uncounted and unnamed." This true political space necessarily includes—if only by virtue of their exclusion—animals, the "constitutive outside" of humanity itself. How we respond to this dynamic ought to be a central question of critical scholarship and philosophizing. To be a philosopher, says Deleuze in the "A for Animal" entry to the "abecedary" (*L'abécédaire de Gilles Deleuze* 1989), "is to write in the place of animals that die." This is still an imperfect way of describing my objective (for one thing, I am also interested in animals that are still alive), but it is an improvement over being a "spokesperson" for animals, which are often characterized as speechless and may be rendered more so having spokespeople appointed to speak on their behalf. To write in the place of animals that die seems a preferable, though still fraught, characterization.

This paper is therefore written in the place of those uncounted and unnamed non-subjects of political space, the animals that die, the nonhumans, the hundreds of millions of animals that are "living out our nightmares" (Raffles 2010, 120):

injected, tested, prodded, then discarded. We have denied, disavowed, and misunderstood animals. They are refused speech, reason, morality, emotion, clothing, shelter, mourning, culture, lying, lying about lying, gifting, laughing, crying—the list has no limit. But "who was born first, before the names?" Derrida (2008, 18) asks. "Which one saw the other come to this place, so long ago? Who will have been the first occupant? Who the subject? Who has remained the despot, for so long now?" Some see identifying this denial as a side-event, inconsequential, even sort of silly. The belief in human superiority is firmly lodged and dear to people's hearts and senses of themselves. It also seems a daunting task, not a simple matter of inserting the excluded into the dominant political order, which as Žižek (1999) writes, neglects how these very subversions and exclusions are the order's condition of being.

But if the political is precisely, as Swyngedouw (2010b) suggests, the expansion of a specific issue into a larger universal demand against "those in power" (an elevation he argues is precluded by the post-political, which reduces an issue to a particular, contained, and very specific demand), then perhaps the universal demand we need to mobilize in the Left *is* humanity itself. We need to write in the place of animals that die, in the sense that our politics must undertake not only a re-writing of our histories of oppression, our constitutions, our global agreements (and who and what are included in them), but also, necessarily, a radical reconfiguring of how subjects are positioned in relation to each other. The human can in fact serve as the named subject of this political effort, perhaps most aptly in environmental struggles. Like Braidotti (2008, 183) argues, "sustainability is about decentering anthropocentrism." It is about an "egalitarianism . . . that displaces both the old-fashioned humanistic assumption that 'man' is the measure of all things and the anthropocentric idea that the only bodies that matter are human" (183). In tackling the human category, I believe the Left would not only be more relevant, but also could bring a transformative sensibility to an environmental politics that often seems to want to blame "humankind" but fails to consider precisely how this material and symbolic category remains untroubled in such misanthropy.

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